

Commencement Address, University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona, May 17, 2003
Senator Jon Kyl

Good afternoon, graduates. And good afternoon, proud families of graduates, and members of the faculty and administration of this great institution. It's a personal privilege for me to return to the University of Arizona for this occasion, because this is a place that changed my life. This is where my wife, Caryll, and I met. Caryll earned her Bachelor of Science degree from the College of Nursing here. I earned my B.A. and law degrees here.

And this is where Caryll and I made friendships that have lasted to this day. It's always great to come back. I especially enjoy getting together with the many students who intern in my Tucson and Washington offices.

Today, you celebrate. Your sense of accomplishment in earning your diploma is justified. I'm sure you join me in thanking all of the people who put their trust in you: your parents, family members, professors, and other mentors.

As one of America's best educators, Booker T. Washington, observed: "Few things can help an individual more than to place responsibility on him, and to let him know that you trust him." This university has done that for you.

And today, you are probably asking yourself the same question that's been on the mind of virtually every graduate from the time degrees were first conferred: "What do I do now?" Commencement speakers frequently offer up advice that goes something like, "Follow Your Dream," "Embrace Your Vision."

But it occurs to me that, if you are like most people, you may not have had this epiphany of what you want to do, or what opportunities might come your way. I'm not saying you shouldn't set goals; and if you are one of those who has been struck by a Mission in Life, that's great. But most, I suspect, have not.

I know I had little understanding of what a career in law would really be like. And I certainly had no grand plan for a political career.

So, if you don't know exactly what you'll be doing, how should you approach your future?

Of course, there is no one answer applicable to all. But, over the years, I've become convinced that there are some basic attributes of human nature that can guide you. The two things I want to share with you today are these: First, the importance of preparation and hard work as we await opportunities. And second, the need to engage in a cause larger than yourself.

My way of encapsulating that first point is to observe that, it's better to be prepared than

predestined. What I mean is, if you've got a good education, which you do now, if you are willing to work, and if you're receptive to opportunity, you needn't worry today, that you don't know exactly what you'll be doing tomorrow. It's a matter of putting yourself in a position to make decisions and take advantage of opportunity when the time comes.

The wisdom I would turn to on this point is as old as Jefferson, and as contemporary as the sage philosophers of the NASCAR circuit. Automobile racing happens to be my favorite sport; and I guarantee you, while the winners may sometimes appear to be lucky, that isn't why they are able to win. Before every race, each driver and crew have carefully prepared, hoping it will pay off by race's end. And they try to avoid mistakes in the early stages of the race.

By thus putting themselves in a position to win, they have a chance at the end -- as they express it: "You make your own luck." The way Thomas Jefferson said it was this: "I'm a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work the more of it I have." Preparation, hard work, and flexibility -- you may not know exactly where you'll end up, but with these attributes, you put yourself in a position to seize opportunities that present themselves and achieve success.

The essential ingredient in this equation I've used -- the equation that "it's better to be prepared than predestined" -- is plain, old, hard work. You've already done quite a bit of that. Get ready for more. But, here's the interesting thing: It is our human nature to gravitate toward what we like to do. And chances are, if you like something, you will be good at it; and that means you'll be willing to work all the harder at it. It's that old adage, "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life."

My second point has to do with the purpose, the larger meaning, of our work. And here, Theodore Roosevelt has something to offer. He said: "Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing."

We should seek endeavors that are not only enjoyable, but also "worth doing." There are plenty of agreeable ways to make money; but there's a whole lot more to life than that. The impulse to serve others is part of what makes us what we are. Find ways to follow that impulse.

Someone who lived in this spirit was my friend, David White. David died too early in life, at the beginning of this year, of cancer, but not before his deeds had an impact on so many others. His wife, Janet Bingham, is a vice president of this University. David dedicated his life to protecting the public as an award-winning prosecutor in Pima County. Throughout his life, both on the job and in his many volunteer activities, he championed the cause of abused children and women. For nearly 25 years, he prosecuted the most difficult capital crime and child-abuses cases that came to trial. After his death in January, Janet was cleaning his office, and she found a quotation framed on his desk. I would like to share it with you: "A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove, but the world might be different because I was important in the life of a child."

That really is work worth doing, and there are a million ways to do it. When I think of my parents and sister, for example, all three of whom were teachers, I know the influence they had on their students, and that was work worth doing.

In fact, think about the two words you've heard a lot over the last four years: our school motto, "Bear Down," the words of a dying student to his football teammates. It is a plea to give your all for the cause. It is about more than winning a game, too. Our connection to others, our obligation to them – to give our all for the cause – is work worth doing.

The University of Arizona belongs to a proud tradition of land-grant colleges and universities. The concept, when it was instituted back in the mid-1800s, was that the states would all receive federal lands on which to build "democracy's college" – an extension of opportunity to every young American in search of higher learning.

The opportunity is also a responsibility – to yourself, those who have helped you, this institution, and the larger community. But, you should not worry today about exactly how you're going to fulfill that responsibility; just know that your preparation here will enable you to avail yourself of opportunities. Make your own luck. And take time to think and act beyond yourself – for others. Every one of you can make a difference – if you Bear Down.

Congratulations to the Class of 2003.